

Life is happy on the other side

A former Exclusive Brethren woman tells SONIA O'REGAN of surviving on the outside.

Hannah's marriage conducted under the watchful eyes of Exclusive Brethren leaders and poisoned by alcoholism is over, replaced by a new life as a working solo mother of seven sons.

"I couldn't be happier," she says. "I wouldn't give up my freedom for anything."

For a person leaving the Exclusive Brethren, whose members are taught that outsiders are unclean, the outside world is an unknown, scary place, says the Canterbury woman, whose name has been changed for this article.

"You are like a goldfish tipped out of the goldfish bowl and into the ocean. You think everyone is a shark or piranha, but then realise there are some friendly fish out there as well."

Four years of counselling and the kindness of people who have helped her have seen her emerge from tough times with sanity intact and her boys, who range in age from five to 21, healthy and happy.

Hannah says she had to take counselling to make sure she was a strong, stable mother.

She walked away after having been "shut up" for the fourth time. She believes the Exclusive Brethren still consider her to be "shut up" but as far as she's concerned she's no longer a member.

The decision was not easy, she says. Those within the Exclusive Brethren are usually forbidden to socialise with family members or friends who have left, so leaving means leaving those people dearest to you.

But to stay would have been intolerable, she says.

"I was being treated as a criminal, not a Christian."

Hannah says her parents were in touch when she first returned to Christchurch, but her father cut her off shortly before and her mother after Hannah appeared on a television news show raising concerns about unreported sexual abuse within the Exclusive Brethren.

She believes they are under pressure to have nothing to do with her.

"It's sad because I dearly love my mother, no one wants to give up close family."

Hannah's six siblings remain in the Exclusive Brethren and don't talk to her either. Hannah is sure they would welcome her if she told them she wanted to "get right" (return to the church), but she is not prepared to do that.

She says that when she was inside the Exclusive Brethren she believed the very worst kind of person was an ex-Exclusive Brethren. Burdened by this one isn't inclined to seek such people out for the help and advice.

Reflecting on life in the Exclusive Brethren, she says so many things that seemed so normal to her now seem absurd, and some seem terrifying.

Miraculously, things fell into place. A friend of a friend organised for her to rent a large family home on a farm in rural Canterbury. The house can't be seen from the public road, which Hannah loves. She has memories of Exclusive Brethren driving by her house checking up on her.

She has gained real estate qualifications with the goal of getting off the domestic purposes benefit.

Hannah was raised as one of seven children in a happy, conservative Christian family in Christchurch in the 1960s and 1970s.

The happy picture changed with the introduction of "bizarre" rules to the Exclusive Brethren in the 1970s and her marriage to a man who struggled with alcoholism in 1984.

Hannah moved to a rural North Island town to live with the husband she had spent three and a half hours with alone on a few occasions before they married.

Hannah's husband became increasingly difficult to live with due to his alcoholism and this combined with the stress caused by the influence of the Exclusive Brethren over their lives eventually split the family, Hannah says. Heavy drinking is a big problem within the Exclusive Brethren, she says.

Hannah says her husband, who did not work for an Exclusive Brethren company, has an individualistic outlook.

She believes this is why her family were subjected to repeated visits from church leaders over various allegations. In her 18-year marriage she estimates the leaders visited about 200 times.

Once was at 5.45am on a Sunday before an early church service to ask why her husband had been seen at a race course. Her husband had seen a man fall off a horse and had gone to help.

These visits caused stomach-wrenching stress, Hannah says. She would go to another room to avoid hearing them.

Hannah says the family subscribed to the rules of Exclusive Brethren, such as those not allowing televisions and radios in houses.

The family would attend the daily church meetings and the three Sunday services, although by the time she had six children she would attend only one Sunday service as it was simply too hard to get along while running a big household and living under such stress.

Such behaviour would prompt a visit from the leaders.

The family were "shut up" four times for minor misdemeanours. The last of these periods, in 2000, was welcomed as a chance for Hannah's husband to attend alcohol treatment with professionals outside of the church, which the Exclusive Brethren had discouraged.

Hannah says her husband has now been healthy for five years.

Hannah says that if she and her husband had had a chance to work on their marriage before God and not the Exclusive Brethren leaders, she probably would have stayed. However, they were never given the opportunity.

"I had a conviction before God that the Exclusive Brethren did not act like Christians and therefore I could not return to that sort of harsh treatment of people."

She knows that Exclusive Brethren leaders assured her husband that his wife would follow him if he returned to the church.

"But in actual fact they split us up," she says.